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*The*  
ENGLISH REGIONAL  
NOVEL

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The English Regional Novel  
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THE  
ENGLISH REGIONAL  
NOVEL

*by*  
PHYLLIS BENTLEY

LONDON

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## THE ENGLISH REGIONAL NOVEL

THE regional novel is the national novel carried to one degree further of subdivision; it is a novel which, concentrating on a particular part, a particular region, of a nation, depicts the life of that region in such a way that the reader is conscious of the characteristics which are unique to that region and differentiate it from others in the common motherland. If any nation, then, were completely homogeneous, not at all diverse, regional novels could not arise within her literature. But where within the limits of a national culture there is a considerable diversity, a considerable variety corresponding to geographical divisions, of patterns of life, in such a nation there exists considerable material for regional novels; and at one period or another of the national history, for causes we may discuss later, writers will be stimulated, by the presence of that material, to handle it.

English literature is extremely rich in regional novels.

Readers approaching English literature from the overseas Dominions, the Americas, the great Asiatic Empires and the larger continental nations are apt to be surprised, and even a little disconcerted, by that fact, for it implies a diversity in England which they had not expected. Similarly those who visit England for the first time from these large national groupings are apt to be surprised and disconcerted by the diversity which they discover in English landscape and English life. They think it natural enough that their own extensive countries should display a rich diversity, but they expect to

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fin<sup>g</sup> little England homogeneous, the same all the way through. Surely, such visitors have sometimes said to me, surely there is no room in your tight little island for a wide range of manner and custom? Surely places are too near together physically in England to be socially far apart?

We who live in England know how mistaken is such an assumption, though it is after all a very natural one, for England is certainly a small place—only 430 miles long by 370 broad, I believe. We who live here know that, within the limits of a very firm and deep-rooted national culture, she displays a quite considerable variety of character, speech, custom and scene. Paradoxical as a diverse England sounds, that paradox is true. It will be well first to investigate this diversity, since it is from the *fons et origo* of English regional literature.

The potential difference between two human habitations must not be measured in mere mileage distance alone. It must be measured first by the difference in race of the two populations, second by the difference in the physical geography of their situations, and third, not by the mere distance between the places but by the time required to transport human beings that distance during the period when the respective customs of the places were being formed—what we may call the “basic human communication time.”

Let me elucidate this last point at once. Some of the great modern cities of the United States, founded since the coming of the railway and furnished in their infancy with other mechanized inventions, have never been more than two or three days' communication distance from New York although they are two or three thousand miles' physical distance; while owing to the telegraph, cinema, radio and so on, very soon

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after their foundation they became only a few seconds' mental distance from the commercial capital of the country. But since England was inhabited from very early times when travel was performed only afoot or on horseback, London and York, for example, have had a basic human communication time of four or five days for many centuries. True, Dick Turpin rode from London to York in fifteen hours, but the private coach of more law-abiding citizens required four days in the seventeenth century, while even in 1842 the crack Highflyer mail took twenty-one hours for the journey. From the days before the Christian era to the coming of the railways and telegraphs in the 1830's and '40's, that is to say some two thousand years, London and York have been several days apart. Two thousand years is a long time—people living four days apart can grow very different in two thousand years.

Consider now the first of the differentiating factors I have mentioned: race. We all know that at least six races domiciled themselves in different parts of England during her early formative period. The Britons, small and dark and Celtic, were the first, the native, race of the island, but were driven back into the north and west by the conquering Romans. It is not my intention to treat in this essay of Scottish or Welsh writings, for those are clearly national rather than regional literatures, but it is to be supposed that these original Britons left traces of their character and habits in the land they once occupied. The Romans left traces of their occupation all over England in the shape of camps and roads, but did not intermarry on any large scale with the native population, so that they probably gave us little at this stage of character or custom. When the Romans, hard pressed on other frontiers, withdrew their garrisons from Britain, the island lay open to the raids

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of certain fair, large, inter-related seafaring tribes: Angles (who settled in East Anglia), Jutes (chiefly in Kent), and Saxons, who occupied various districts of the east, south-east, and south-west (East Saxons in Essex, South Saxons in Sussex, West Saxons in Wessex) and set up kingdoms there. A few hundred years later came Danes, tall, lean, and perhaps red-haired though historians seem to disagree on this point, who occupied the northern parts of England, especially my own county of Yorkshire. Alfred the Great, a West Saxon man, united England and drove out the Danes at last, but not before they left their mark on the place—a mark which the northern speech shows strongly to this day. Finally in the list of invaders came the Normans, small, neat and more or less French, who took the cream of the land for themselves in every district and married only with their own race or the wealthiest layers of the previous population.

I hope my more sophisticated readers will forgive me this cheerfully over-simplified and rather flippant sketch of early English history; my excuse is that it is absolutely necessary that these facts should be present in the mind during any consideration of the English regional novel. It must also be present in the mind that since the Norman Conquest in 1066 England has been one nation, with one king, one government, one law, and presently one official language; so that unifying influences also have been at work a long time.

What of the second differentiating factor, physical geography?

I hope that I may be forgiven again if I rapidly sketch in the basic geographical facts about England, for they are essential to the subject we have in view. With Scotland and Wales, England is an island; she has 1,800 miles of coast-line, and no

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place in England is more than seventy miles from some sea. England has one considerable range of hills, the Pennine Chain, which stretches north and south down the centre of the island, from the Lake District into Derbyshire; mountainous at each end, rolling moorland hills between. She has also innumerable ranges of smaller hills, Cotswolds, Mendip, Downs and so on, rolling all over the country in every possible direction. England has three plains: one in the Midlands, one in Yorkshire, one in East Anglia. The East Anglian plain is largely fen country, land reclaimed from the sea, drained by dykes, low-lying, fertile and in continued danger from floods. England is a very well watered country. The Thames, Severn and the two Ouses are her only considerable rivers, and they are not large by other nations' standards, but thousands of small rivers course through the length and breadth of the land. England has several very rich fields of coal and iron, scattered through the Midlands and north.

*Until I travelled in the United States and Canada, I did not realize what a percentage of variety to the square mile England possessed. I had been told, of course, that in England the landscape changes at least every fifty miles, and seen it vaguely for myself in many a railway journey, but I had not known how unique and surprising this was till I found that on the American continent one could travel for hundreds of miles and at the beginning, middle and end of the journey be continuously in the same kind of scenery. The British Isles have, in fact, a geological diversity amazing for their size. We do not achieve deserts or tundras, Himalayas, geysers, icebergs or Mississippis, but within the limits of the temperate zone and on a small scale, we can supply almost any geological specification. We have the following geological strata among many others.*

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Chalk, appearing in the white cliffs of Dover. Old Red sandstone, in the red cliffs of Devon. New red sandstone, in the fertile red Midland plains. Basalt, in the black towering crags of the Lake District. White limestone, on which grows very sweet short green grass, in some parts of the Pennine Chain. Millstone grit, a hard sombre rock on which grows only tough grass or heather, in other parts of the Pennine Chain. Sandstone, a yellowish earth on which flourish those lovely trees, beeches and silver birches. Clay—good for roses. Granite. Coal measures. Iron ore. Pottery clay. Marl, lias and many others. Now wherever the rock changes, the soil changes, the crops and cattle change, the industry changes, and the manners and customs of the people tend to be different too.

• Owing to these various factors I have mentioned, then, the racial, the geographical and the "basic human communication time," occurring in combination, there are in England a number of well-marked regions which, while forming part of the national entity, have yet distinct and diverse characters of their own.

The material for English regional literature therefore exists in abundance.

This material has been abundantly handled in fiction, in the 19th and 20th centuries. The reason why regional fiction flowered in this period is, I think, precisely that improvement in communications which during the same period is tending to render the regions themselves less regional. Yorkshire did not know it was Yorkshire, nor Somerset Somerset, until the frequent travel made possible by improved communications showed Yorkshiremen and Somersetmen other counties, so that they realized how different was their own. (Even the

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Brontës did not write Yorkshire novels till they had been through London to Belgium!) As with other literary forms, English regional fiction went through a development, achieved a culmination; in the 1930's it received a fresh impetus from a certain historical situation, and flourished numerically more than ever before. Now, beaten upon by motor-bus, radio, evacuation, and the national unity of feeling caused by the war, the regions are tending more than ever to merge and lose their regionalism, and regional fiction is accordingly at the moment on the decrease. A combination of factors may revive it again, or some great regional genius may arise and give it fresh life; posterity will see; but I am inclined to believe at present that the golden age of the English regional novel is approximately 1840 to 1940.

There are four great writers of the past who created, developed, and possibly perfected the English regional novel, and a host of lesser writers, past and present, who in conscientious and interesting regional work have sometimes contributed fresh technical features to the form, sometimes applied the methods of their predecessors to fresh matter. I propose to consider first the work of the four regional masters—Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Arnold Bennett—with occasional reference to the work of their minor contemporaries, so that we may observe the characteristics of the regional novel, with their gradual extension; then to discuss the regional renaissance of the 1930's, its cause and practitioners. The material being thus all displayed, a discussion of the merits and defects of the regional novel as an art form seems proper: and it is tempting at the present moment, when the value of our national contribution to civilization is being so widely canvassed, to conclude with



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an attempted estimate of its significance in our national culture.

There are certain technical terms I should like first to establish, so that there shall be no misunderstanding when I employ them. To understand the characteristics of the regional novel we must ascertain how far the elements of the novel are affected by regionalism when it is present, how far and how deeply the local colour dyes. I shall define the elements of the novel as *character*, *plot*, *setting* and *narrative*, with the *theme* as the circumscribing factor. The theme is the aspect of life the writer wishes to illuminate; the plot is the chain of actions, linked by cause and effect, which exemplifies the theme; the characters are the imaginary but typical human beings who perform the actions; they do so against a background of time and place which constitutes the setting; the whole being related in words so arranged as to form a narrative in prose. Other elements might perhaps be proposed for the novel, other definitions of those elements supplied; I ask that those I have put forward be accepted in the present discussion for convenience of reference.

The first great English regional novel is Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, published in 1849.

The scene, the setting, of *Shirley* is the cloth district of the West Riding of Yorkshire, right in the heart of the Pennine Chain. *Shirley* is also an historical novel; the date of the story is 1812, when, owing to Napoleon's famous Berlin decrees directed against Britain's trade, the cloth industry was suffering an almost complete cessation of exports. The mill-owners were therefore in a very serious position financially and the workers

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suffering severe unemployment. Robert Gérard Moore, a mill-owner half Yorkshire half Belgian by birth, tries to improve his financial position by the introduction of labour-saving machinery into his mill, which will cheapen the price and so, he hopes, extend the market of his cloth. His workers, who believe they will have even less employment than before if the machines are put in, smash these machines on their way across the moor to Hollows Mill, later attack the mill, and presently make an attempt on Moore's life. Moore is supported in his resistance by other manufacturers of the district, notably the rough hearty Hiram Yorke, and by the clergy and gentry generally. To forward his plans, Moore proposes to marry a neighbouring heiress, Shirley Keeldar, though he really loves the gentle and retiring Caroline Helstone, who is pining away for love of him in her uncle's rectory. Robert is contemptuously rejected by the high-spirited Shirley, and when the war is over and trade recovers, marries the faithful Caroline. Meanwhile Shirley and Robert's half-brother Louis, a strong character occupying the humble position of tutor, overcome the difficulties in the way of their mutual attachment, while Shirley's elderly chaperon proves to be Caroline's mother.

I have described *Shirley* in greater detail than I propose to adopt for any other novel mentioned, because I wish to indicate the method of analysis fully the first time it is employed. Let us examine the elements of this novel closely with respect to their degree of regionalism.

The *setting* is perceived to be intensely regional; the action takes place throughout amongst the bleak high moors, the interlocking valleys, the swift rocky streams, the lighted mills, of the West Riding.

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In considering the *plot* element, we must remember that the woollen textile trade of the West Riding is entirely a product of the physical geography of the district. The rough bleak hills of millstone grit, the grass growing on which would feed sheep but not cattle, the soil of which would grow only scanty crops of oats; the many tumbling streams; the pockets of coal and iron; those, providing as they do wool, water and power, are the origins of the West Riding cloth industry. Now all the plot of *Shirley* except the actual loves of Shirley and Louis Moore turns on the difficulties of various members of the textile trade in the year 1812; many of the incidents are directly concerned with this trade, some actually take place in Hollows Mill. The plot of *Shirley* is therefore highly though not completely regional.

Many of the *characters* in *Shirley* are textile mill-owners, foremen, workmen, employed and unemployed—characters, that is, whose livelihood springs directly from the physical geography of the region.

When the actual *words* of this novel are considered, it will be seen that a quite considerable amount of the dialogue is written in dialect, that is in regional speech. The conversations between Joe Scott the foreman and Moore and Yorke, the talk of the unemployed workman William Farren, are thoroughly regional.

The four elements of *setting*, *plot*, *character* and *narrative* are all therefore tinged, more or less completely, by the local dye. But the *theme* is not so tinged. The theme of *Shirley* is the love of a proud high-spirited rich girl for a poor professor—it is the reverse of the theme displayed in *Jane Eyre*. There is nothing regional in this theme.

Before leaving *Shirley* we may perhaps notice a character-

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ization of the whole work which appears from the hand of its author on its very first page. "Calm your expectations," says Charlotte, addressing herself to her readers:

"If you think . . . that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken. Calm your expectations . . . something real, cool, and solid lies before you; something as unromantic as Monday morning."

It will be well to carry that description along with us through this essay.

Some surprise may have been felt at the selection of *Shirley* rather than *Wuthering Heights*, an incomparably greater work and of earlier date (1847), as the first outstanding English regional novel. But Emily's novel is not nearly as regional as her sister's. The setting, of course, is superbly regional; the pictures of the West Riding moors in all their moods are magnificent literature and magnificent regionalism. But of the characters only one, and he a minor personage, the horrid old manservant Joseph, is completely Yorkshire and speaks Yorkshire dialect; the others belong mostly to an age, the 18th century, rather than to a place, while Heathcliff hails from an unknown clime. The plot has nothing regional about it, and could have occurred anywhere; the theme is love turning to hate turning to revenge, about which there is nothing specifically Yorkshire. Neither the land nor the trade of the district plays any part in the action. This is not to criticize Emily's masterpiece; we simply note that on approaching *Wuthering Heights* our expectations need not be calmed but on the contrary can be raised to the highest pitch, that the story is not real, cool and solid, but wild, passionate and poetical, that it is less regional than *Shirley*—and pass on.

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<sup>1</sup>Before turning to our next great regional novelist, George Eliot, we must notice briefly, for different reasons, the work of Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell and of Anthony Trollope. (It will be understood that I am not speaking of the intrinsic merit and total work of these writers, but only of their contribution to regional fiction.)

Mrs. Gaskell wrote two admirably regional novels about industrial Lancashire: *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855). They are a complementary pair. *North and South*, the story of a "Darkshire" cotton manufacturer and a South-country "lady," is still very readable, John Thornton being one of those "granite" northern characters who quell strikes forcibly but are too proud to show their softer feelings, which prolongs the agony agreeably; *Mary Barton* is rather heavy going, for so many people die in its course that one's sympathies become quite exhausted, but it contains one or two features of importance. The scene is laid in Manchester, and the main characters are all workpeople. There is only one middle-class family, the Carsons, and though they are necessary to the development of the plot, they are definitely subordinate figures; the workpeople, the craftsmen, take the centre of the stage, and the vicissitudes of a cotton weaver's life play a large part in the plot. Dialect is therefore constantly in use, and is handled with great accuracy and effectiveness; in footnotes Mrs. Gaskell gives the philological derivations of such words as "nesh" and "farrantly," thus claiming for dialect its real place in English literature. These two points—the free use of dialect and the adoption of working people as the main characters of the story—are important ones in the development of the regional novel.

The contribution of Trollope to regionalism is quite other.

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Trollope is not, and did not intend to be, a regional writer, unless one extends regionalism to include districts of spiritual area; his scenery, plots and characters might belong to any non-industrial part of England, his occasional whiffs of dialect are conventionalized, without definite habitation. But in the matter of imaginary topography his contribution to regionalism is striking. In *The Warden* (1855), the first of the Barchester series, he lays the scene of the story in a fictitious cathedral town in the West of England. "Let us," he says in the opening chapter, "call it Barchester."

"Let us call it Barchester. Were we to name Wells or Salisbury, Exeter, Hereford or Gloucester, it might be presumed that something personal was intended; and as this tale will refer mainly to the cathedral dignitaries of the town in question, we are anxious that no personality may be suspected."

The reason for novelists' fictitious locations could not be better stated. With this cathedral city of Barchester as a nucleus Trollope, as we all know, gradually created for himself a fictitious topography extending over quite a large area, and—and this is my point—he used this topography not in one novel only, but in every Barchester novel, and often in his political novels as well. The landscapes, roads, churches, parishes and houses of Barsetshire are always the same, whether you are reading *Barchester Towers* (1857) or *Framley Parsonage* (1861) or *Phineas Redux* (1874); the Duke of Omnium always lives at Gatherum, the De Courcys are at Courcy, the Robarts at Framley, the Grantlys at Plumstead; the Great House and the Small House at Allington are always situated the same with respect to each other; if we observe alterations in the Bishop's Palace, so does Archdeacon Grantly, and attributes them to

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Mrs. Proudie with disgust. Maps can be drawn, have been drawn, of Barsetshire; the situation of Hogglegstock is the subject of essays.

That these are commonplaces to all Trollopeans I am well aware, but it is perhaps not always clearly realized that this idea of a consistent fictitious topography, now the customary convention, the familiar tool, of every regional novelist, was the invention of Trollope, who foreshadowed in this respect George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. }

George Eliot's first four works of fiction are all definitely regional, their setting being the Midland counties where she spent her childhood and youth. *Scenes of Clerical Life*, which appeared in 1857, two years after *The Warden*, was so definitely localized in Warwickshire that the scenery and even the characters were immediately recognized by the people of Nuneaton, the "Milby" of the novel, so that they wrote the names of the real originals in the margins of their copies of the book. The scene of *Adam Bede* (1859) is set in Staffordshire and Derbyshire, which George Eliot always calls Loamshire and Stonyshire respectively. Her fictitious topography is extensive and corresponds fairly closely to reality, but it does not draw the reader's attention as does that of Trollope—few writers could equal Trollope's amazing gift for characteristic and revealing place-names. *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) is a Lincolnshire novel, St. Ogg's, where the mill stood, being identified with Gainsborough on the Trent. In *Silas Marner* (1861) the scene is Warwickshire again. *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871) are less decidedly regional novels, though their scene is laid in imaginary Midland towns.

The plots of George Eliot's novels are not, except in one

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instance, altogether regional; they do not depend on the region for their causality, they could have happened elsewhere. But a great many of the episodes, the incidents, of her stories are regional. In *Adam Bede*, for instance, many of the actions take place during harvesting, milking, fruit-picking and so on. The exception, the truly regional plot, occurs in *The Mill on the Floss*, where we are conscious throughout of the river Floss, and the plot could not occur without it. The opening of the book reveals the child Maggie Tulliver playing happily by its banks, and the Floss, with its water-rights and its floods and its boats and its tidal wave, is woven like a silver thread into the story until at last we leave Maggie and Tom drowned beneath its waters.

Turning to the George Eliot characters, we find that many of her main, important characters are truly regional. The Tullivers in *The Mill on the Floss* run the water-mill. The Poysers in *Adam Bede* are small tenant farmers who farm with their own hands, Hetty Sorrel is a dairymaid who with her own hands turns the milk of the region into butter. Silas Marner is a hand-loom weaver. In *Middlemarch* the only wholly admirable character is Caleb Garth, a land agent of the workmanlike, craftsman type. The George Eliot region is an agricultural country, and therefore the truly regional characters are those who wrest a living directly from the soil. We notice that in all George Eliot's novels there are also characters of the gentry and professional classes; the Irwines and Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*, Philip in *The Mill on the Floss*, the Squire in *Silas Marner*, and so on. But we notice also that George Eliot's sympathies lie with the regional craftsman type; indeed she turns aside from her story for a whole chapter in *Adam Bede* to praise them.



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George Eliot's treatment of dialect is interesting and important. She makes considerable use of it, especially in *Adam Bede*, where many of the minor characters and all the major characters save one speak in this regional way. She handles it very effectively, with far fewer apostrophes and phonetic spellings than Charlotte Brontë or Mrs. Gaskell. This she did deliberately, following a theory of her own. In a letter to the philologist Skeat she explained this theory, telling him that her inclination to be as close as she could in her rendering of dialect, both in words and spelling, was "constantly checked by the artistic duty of being generally intelligible. It is a just demand," she went on, "that art should keep clear of such specialities as would make it a puzzle for the larger part of its public." In view of some of the accusations which are brought against the regional novel, which I hope to discuss later, this statement is important. We might notice, too, a remark of one of the characters of *Adam Bede* on that famous farmer's wife, Mrs. Poyser. "Sharp," he says. "Yes, her tongue is like a new-set razor. She's quite original in her talk too; one of those untaught wits that help to stock a county with proverbs."

There remains one other fiction element to be considered in George Eliot's work: her themes. Are these regional? No; but they are, I think, provincial; it seems, on the authority of her own statements, that she felt a definite call to the interpretation of the realities of ordinary everyday near-at-hand provincial life, as opposed to the artificial romance of remote adventure. She observes in *Amos Barton*:

"Depend upon it, you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me to see some of the poetry and the pathos . . . lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tone."

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And again, in *Adam Bede*:

"There are few prophets in the world, few sublimely beautiful women, few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities; I want a great deal of those feelings for my everyday fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground whose faces I know. . . . So I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this, that you would be likely to turn a harder, colder eye on the dusty streets and the common green fields and the real breathing men and women. . . ."

Compare this with Charlotte Brontë's "something as unromantic as Monday morning"; the lineaments of the regional novel are beginning to emerge.

There should perhaps be mentioned here R. D. Blackmore, whose romantic story of Devonshire in Monmouth's day, *Lorna Doone* (1869), a combination of the regional and historical interests, has delighted every generation of young readers since it was written.

It seems an unnecessary impertinence to attempt any fresh estimate of Hardy at this time of day, but if we confine ourselves strictly to the contribution made by his magnificent work to the regional *genre* perhaps the attempt may not altogether lack the interest of novelty. //

Between 1871 and 1896 Thomas Hardy wrote fourteen novels and two or three volumes of short stories, all of which are localized in Wessex for part, and most for all, of their course. Indeed in the minds of most readers the first association of the word Wessex is with Hardy's name, we have

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forgotten its original significance as the designation of the kingdom of the West Saxons in the days of King Alfred. Hardy's own explanation of his adoption of the name has some points of interest. He tells us:

"The series of novels I projected being mainly of the kind called local, they seemed to require a territorial definition of some sort to lend unity to their scene. Finding that the area of a single county did not afford a canvas large enough for this purpose, I disinterred the old one. It was in the chapters of *Far From the Madding Crowd* that I first ventured to adopt the word Wessex from the pages of early English history, and give it a fictitious significance as the existing name of the district once included in that extinct kingdom."

It is interesting to note that in 1874 Hardy already "projected a series" of local novels; this is the first time we have met such an intention in English literature.

As is well known to all readers, Hardy gradually devised a fictitious topography for the whole of the large Wessex area; so that in the later editions of his novels a map of Wessex is a customary feature.

Wessex—that is to say the six south-west counties of England, Hampshire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall—is a stretch of agricultural and pastoral country, dotted with heath and woodland, and rolling down to a rugged sea coast. Every variety of this lovely and diverse landscape is portrayed in Hardy's novels: the rocky coast in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873); the farmland and undulating downs in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874); the wild heath in *The Return of the Native* (1878); the woods and orchards in *The Woodlanders* (1887); the rich fertile dairy vales, where the russet cows stand knee-deep in the lush pastures, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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(1891). It is not necessary at this date to dwell on the poetic quality of Hardy's landscapes, but a reminder may be useful of the penetrating accuracy of observation, the amazing precision in local detail, which they display. Hardy is familiar with every detail of Wessex weather and can tell the species of a tree in the dark by its mere sound; he observes the leathery skin of the toad, the shorn sheep's flush, the odd behaviour of thatch spiders; he has heard the barking-tool on trees sound "like the quack of a duck," and describes with prolonged realism the raking and rubbing and brushing and wailing of the passage of a gust of wind through grass. He shows indeed an altogether more intense concentration upon each sight and sound of his chosen region than any we have hitherto encountered in English regional novelists. And this observation of the outward scene is correlated by knowledge; the history, the tradition, the music, the folk-lore of Wessex supply a continual richness of reference to his descriptions. In Hardy's novels the local colour dyes the setting element more deeply, more richly than in any other regional fiction.

Passing from this to the plot element in Hardy's work, we find that the episodes, the incidents of his stories are intimately interwoven with one or other of the Wessex trades. Following the fortunes of his characters, we find ourselves involved in the various operations connected with sheep-rearing, cider-making, furze-cutting, timber-growing, stoneworking, milking, harvesting, the keeping of pigs. The chain of causality has a regional link in two of his novels: *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*. The tragedy of *The Return of the Native* springs directly from the inter-reaction of the character of Eustacia Vye and the quality of Egdon Heath. It is to escape from sombre Egdon that Eustacia marries Clym

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Yeobright; the Heath is therefore an essential part of the action, the story could not take place without this piece of Wessex. The regional causality in *The Woodlanders* is less important; the "livier" system of leasehold, peculiar to Wessex, being only a contributory cause of Giles Winterbourne's disasters.

The characters in Hardy's novels cover the whole range of Wessex inhabitants, from Lord Luxellian down to poor old Granfer Cattle, but the majority, and the majority of main characters, are closely dependent for their livelihood on the Wessex soil. It has often been pointed out that the vitality of Hardy's characters is in direct proportion to this closeness; the peasants and farmers are completely alive, the innkeepers less so; the professional men recede, a little dim; by the time peers are reached, the vital cord has been stretched altogether too far, and scarcely any life-blood animates these puppet creations. Equally significant is the fact that whenever, in Hardy's continual presentation of "the immortal puzzle" of love relations, two men are suitors to one woman, or two women love one man, it is always the lover of lower social rank whom Hardy prefers. He prefers shepherd to sergeant and farmer (*For From the Modding Crowd*), but farmer to doctor (*The Woodlanders*); carrier to vicar (*Under the Greenwood Tree*); ruddleman to innkeeper and country girl to captain's daughter (*The Return of the Native*); poor country girl to rich country girl, but rich country girl to townswoman (*The Woodlanders*). He prefers them, that is to say he makes them more agreeable to the reader. For the preservation of local legend and folklore, observes Hardy, the indispensable conditions are attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation. It is the personages of lower social rank, who are

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continuously attached to the soil because they lack the means to wander, who thus preserve these dear traditions; it is these personages whom Hardy delights to delineate.

These characters speak, in suitably varying degrees, the racy Wessex dialect. But here we come to a reservation. In a letter to the *Athenaeum* in 1878 Hardy refers to "a somewhat vexed question," namely:

"... the representation in writing of the speech of the peasantry, when that writing is intended to show mainly the character of the speakers, and only to give a general idea of their linguistic peculiarities. . . . If a writer attempts to exhibit on paper the precise accents of a rustic speaker, he disturbs the proper balance of a true representation by unduly insisting upon the grotesque element; thus directing attention to a point of inferior interest and diverting it from the speaker's meaning, which is by far the chief concern when the aim is to depict the men and their natures rather than their dialect forms."

Hardy is more concerned, that is to say, to present his characters' natures than the Wessex speech, which, in spite of his very real erudition in West Country dialect, he regards as a point of inferior interest. He goes on to explain how a sufficiently satisfying impression of peasant talk may be given by certain technical devices, such as a sparing use of local words combined with a retention of local syntax, and so on; but the reservation is an important one, and the reason for it no less important. The tide of local colour has been definitely checked, and that, not for the sake of art, nor for George Eliot's sense of the duty of being generally intelligible, but because of a refusal to subordinate the individual to the local. A hint of the same limitation of the tide of regionalism

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occurs in a passage in *The Woodlanders*. The village of Little Hintock, the scene of the action, was, says Hardy:

"... one of those sequestered spots . . . where, from time to time, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein."

It seems he has chosen Little Hintock because of the story, rather than the story because it reveals Little Hintock; the human is again preferred to the local.

Hardy's themes, in a word, are not regional. The aspect of life which he habitually wishes to present is a certain view of the workings of the universe as they affect humanity; for this philosophy, this comprehensive scheme of the cosmos, he offers Wessex illustrations. It is Hardy's peculiar contribution to literature, and unique glory, to take a Wessex peasant, intensely local in birth, speech and story, and set him against a background of the universe; in so doing he illuminates Wessex, certainly, but in a light which comes from beyond the stars.

There are therefore, I would suggest, two colours in Hardy's work; a local colour, red perhaps we may call it like the warm Devon soil, and a universal colour, blue perhaps like the firmament of heaven. It is a union of these colours which gives Hardy's work its sombre, its magnificent, its quite unsurpassably regal, purple. /

The 1880's and 1890's saw a good output of conscientious regional fiction, of which only a few items can be mentioned here. S. Baring-Gould in Devon and Cornwall, Keighley Snowden, J. S. Fletcher and Halliwell Sutcliffe among others in Yorkshire, found in local setting and local history abundant

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and attractive fiction material, while Hall Caine melodramatized the Isle of Man.

It is a little difficult to know where to place Eden Phillpotts chronologically, for during almost half a century he has celebrated the characters, the speech and the customs of Devonshire, and especially of Dartmoor, in a long series of fictions, some humorous, some strongly dramatic in tone, of which *Children of the Mist* (1898) and *The Secret Woman* (1905) are the best known. At one time this writer projected a series of novels dealing each with a different Devonian industry, and *Brunel's Town* (1915) and *The Spinners* (1919) were written, with backgrounds of pottery and spinning respectively; but he felt a purpose so conscious a hindrance to expression, and presently desisted.

With the work of Arnold Bennett we reach a further development, indeed at first sight it appears the final development, of the regional novel.

Bennett, after a hint at his interest in local character in *A Man From the North* (1898), began his distinctively regional work in 1902 with *Anna of the Five Towns*, and continued it in a number of novels and stories, each written with a powerful and striking realism, a technique then new in English fiction.

Bennett's region is, of course, that intensely urban and industrial district, some eight miles square, situated on the river Trent in the north of Staffordshire, which he has made known to the world as the Five Towns. These towns are Tunstall, Hanley, Burslem, Stoke-upon-Trent and Longton; Bennett calls them Turnhill, Hanbridge, Bursley, Knype-on-Trent and Longshaw. This fictitious nomenclature is so near reality that Bennett cannot have expected it to confer any concealment;



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it gave him, however, that freedom of creation, that power of being typical instead of merely actual, which all regional novelists have found necessary in their work. There may be sixty streets, each a little different from its neighbour, in a town; it is the artist's part to create, from his observations of the sixty, one street which shall be typical, symbolic, of them all; this street, though real in essence, is in fact fictitious, and must be given a fictitious designation.

The Five Towns, in literature as in life, are "mean and forbidding of aspect," as Bennett tells us grimly: "sombre, hard-featured, uncouth." Where Hardy describes ploughland and pasture, woodland and heath, Bennett speaks with the same affection of mill chimneys, tramway lines, pot-banks, shunting yards and furnaces. Machinery clangs harshly through his books; we feel the scorching heat of pottery ovens and drying-stoves, we breathe the clay which, as Bennett dryly remarks in *Anna*, "fills the lungs and blanches the cheek of the Bursley man, keeps him alive and kills him."

For the industry of pottery is native to the Five Towns; springing from the physical geography of the place, from the nature of the earth, it has been carried on there for more than ten centuries. The local deposits of clay have long since been exhausted, but the indispensable coal still lies near, while skill in the art of the potter has become almost an hereditary predisposition in Five Towns men and women, so that it has been found cheaper (that criterion of the 19th century!) to bring the clay to the coal and the skill than to try to take the coal and the skill to the clay. Accordingly the Five Towns are still, as Bennett says in *The Old Wives' Tale*:

"... unique and indispensable because you cannot drink tea out of a teacup without the aid of the Five Towns, you cannot eat

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a meal in decency without the aid of the Five Towns. All the everyday crockery used in the kingdom is made in the Five Towns—all, and much beside. For this the architecture of the Five Towns is an architecture of ovens and chimneys: for this its atmosphere is as black as its mud . . . for this indeed it exists—that you may drink tea out of a teacup and toy with a chop on a plate.”

‘ This single industry, pursued so long and under conditions of such narrow monopoly, have made the Five Towns an industrial unit, and hence a sociological unit too. Unconscious expression has been given to this unity by Arnold Bennett in a famous passage of *Whom God Hath Joined*, describing the Five Towns at dusk.

“All round the horizon . . . the yellow fires of furnaces grow brighter in the first oncoming of the dusk. The immense congeries of streets and squares, of little houses and great halls and manufactories, of church spires and proud smoking chimneys and chapel towers, mingle together into one wondrous organism that stretches and rolls unevenly away for miles in the grimy mists of its own endless panting.”

That phrase “one wondrous organism” gives the clue to Bennett’s work. It is the functioning, the evolution of that wondrous organism the-Five-Towns-as-a-whole, with, as Bennett writes in *Whom God Hath Joined*:

“all their vast apparatus of mayors and aldermen and chains of office, their gas and their electricity, their swift transport, their daily paper, their religions, their fierce pleasures, their vices, their passionate sports and their secret ideals . . .”

which really interests Bennett, interests him more than his individual characters and their stories. The Five Towns organism, a 19th-century industrial community in the very

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thick of the mysterious process of evolution, is not merely the setting, but the theme of Bennett's work.

This is implicit in his treatment of all the other fiction elements: character, plot, words. In that delightful book *The Card*, for instance, the fun of the thing is not so much that Denry Machin does these astonishingly cute and successful things, as that these are the astonishing things which a Five Towns mayor is apt to do. In *The Regent*, *The Card's* sequel, we are similarly amused by the spectacle of a Five Towns business man successfully diddling the London theatrical world. The histories of Edwin Clayhanger and his wife, again, are not so much the stories of an individual man and woman who happened to live in the Five Towns, as the story of two interesting types which the Five Towns threw off in the course of its evolution, and what the Five Towns did to them. Only in *The Old Wives' Tale* does Bennett's account of human nature transcend the local and become universal.

Bennett's use of dialect is sparing, though telling, because his use of dialogue in general is sparing though telling; there is nothing worth special notice in this. But the ordinary course of his narrative is amazingly sprinkled with references to the Five Towns. The number of sentences which begin: "In the Five Towns," "It is customary in the Five Towns," "It is a peculiarity of the Five Towns," and so on raises this habit of jocular reference into a distinct mannerism of style, and a highly significant mannerism it is. The Five Towns are the overmastering interest, to which other interests are subordinated; the Five Towns are the circumscribing factor; the Five Towns are the theme.

Thus in Bennett's Five Towns novels every fiction element is regional. He is therefore the most completely regional

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novelist we have so far studied; in his work the *genre* has surely reached its greatest possible intensity; the tide of local colour is completely "in." But no; perhaps there is still one tiny strip of beach unwashed; for Bennett's regionalism, though complete in extent, was not completely conscious in its expression. Bennett was interested (as he tells us in his *Journals* for 1898) and believed every artist should be interested, "primarily in presentment, not in the thing presented." His mental gaze was so intent on his fascinating method of presentment, realism, that he did not quite perceive the significance of the picture which emerged from his vast accumulations of detail. He carved every piece of his jig-saw with a meticulous accuracy, painted it with a vivid local hue; we now see the whole picture, and find it to be a portrait of that wondrous organism, the Five Towns.

We may say that the type of the regional novel was now stabilized, as is said in horticultural circles when a new cross-bred species reaches the stage where it can be relied on to reproduce itself without losing its distinctive new features, and accordingly some admirable specimens of the regional novel, conforming to the general characteristics of the breed though individually various in vision, method and degree of regionalism, were now produced. Half-a-dozen regional writers upheld the regional tradition through the first three decades of the 20th century (1900-1929) in novels of considerable ability and distinction.

The earliest in time, E. C. Booth, is the laureate of the Holderness district in Yorkshire. I use the word laureate advisedly, because his descriptions of the sandy shore, the rich cornland, and the coastwise lights of that beautiful region

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have a poetic and romantic quality—which extends also to his characters. In each book, beginning with *The Cliff End* in 1908, some of his main characters are not natives of Holderness, but more or less permanent “incomers”—the doctor, the vicar’s daughter, the delicate city boy sent to the country for his health, and so on—while the person whose story is linked with theirs belongs to the soil, as is the case with the blacksmith in *Fondle* (1916). Mr. Booth’s plots are not regional; they draw their conflict from social or individual inequalities—this writer has a very keen sense for those who are not quite equal to the burdens life places on them. He makes a very heavy use of dialect; the rich slow speech of the East Riding has never received fuller or more accurate expression.

The most famous member of this group is Mary Webb, over whose Shropshire novels there shines a strange rich light, “a magical atmosphere,” as she says herself, “a richness on the world, so it looked what our parson used to call sumptuous.” I have sometimes felt that this light was a light which never shone on the real sea or land, but perhaps after all it is the product of the meeting of the Celtic and Saxon cultures, an iridescent impalpable mist looming over the Welsh marches. In *Gone to Earth* (1917), *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920), *Seven for a Secret* (1922) and especially in the celebrated *Precious Bane* (1924) Mary Webb reveals a close knowledge of all the romantic and tragic aspects of this borderland life; its folk-lore, traditions, superstitions, games and songs are all of a high importance in her characters’ lives, and provide the materials of their stories. Her use of dialect is highly individual; many local words—such as “dimmy,” “win-nocked,” “waidly,” “~~him~~”—and turns of phrase are woven into a smooth glowing tissue which sometimes has a vivid beauty

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but sometimes cloy with its air of the deliberately quaint. The emotional tension is always great; sometimes the demand on the reader's sympathies is illogical—as when in *Gone to Earth* one is asked to weep for the fox which is hunted but not for the chickens the fox hunts—sometimes justified; but there is never any paling of the rich colour of human passion, never any slackening in the demand on human sensibility.

In *Snow Over Elden* (1920) and *The Comely Lass* (1923) a similarly poetized vision of his native soil is revealed by Thomas Moulton, who indeed has shown his affinity to Mary Webb by a critical study of her work. Thomas Moulton's country is that mountainous district of Derbyshire where the Peak terminates the Pennine Chain. The action of *Snow Over Elden* takes place at an isolated Peakland farm during a few days of snow and storm round Twelfth Night. Several love stories, simple but intense, are brought to a happy termination by means of a first-person narrative, written in a picturesque smooth dialect, richly embroidered with metaphor. The gusto of this writer, his poetical vision of and deep love for common things, give his work a fervid and glowing colour. He is considerably conscious of his own regionalism. "How mighty and glorious Derbyshire and her children are!" exclaims Jan Hyde at one time—and indeed all the inhabitants of the Hydes' farm, not excluding the cows, are seen by their creator as glamorous.

It will be proper to mention here the work of the founder of the P.E.N., C. A. Dawson Scott, whose Cornish novels, *They Green Stones* (1925) and others, do not lose sight of sociological implications in their depiction of the landscape and dialect of that picturesque county.

Mountains and Celtic proximity make, it would seem, for a

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more vivid emotional life—or at least for a more vivid way of describing it. With the next novelist in this group we are amid quieter scenery, and the passions depicted, though quite as strong, are perhaps rather “stark” than highly coloured. Sheila Kaye-Smith has put the life of the borders of Kent and Sussex, and the county of Sussex, into a series of sincere and well-constructed fictions, beginning with an historical novel of Methodism in the 18th century on the banks of the Rother, *The Tramping Methodist*, in 1908. Her best-known novels, *Sussex Gorse* (1916) and *Joanna Godden* (1921), are strongly regional in setting, character, speech and story, especially the earlier of the two. The hero of *Sussex Gorse*, Reuben Backfield, son of the owner of Odiam Farm, is possessed of a lifelong passion to make the neighbouring common of Boarzell—a place of coarse grass and heather, rocks and wind-bitten firs—his own, and tame it beneath the plough. To this ambition, which at the end of his life Reuben finally achieves, he gradually sacrifices his own happiness and that of everyone connected with him; so that the whole plot of the novel hangs on Boarzell. *Joanna Godden*, the story of a woman who farms her own land, is less intensely regional, though sheep play a large part in her affairs. *Tamarisk Town* (1919) is the story of the rise and fall of a Sussex seaside resort; *The End of the House of Alard* (1924) describes the decay of an old Sussex aristocracy; and so on. Miss Kaye-Smith’s use of dialect is very frequent, and realistic in expression; “a dunnamy years agone,” “maaster dear,” “adone do,” “larmementable sorry,” “doan’t vrother,” and so on are strewn through the pages.

With Constance Holme we are in the mountains again. Her novels have as their background Westmorland, chiefly that piece of it which touches the sea between Lancashire and

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Furness, and forms the estuary of the river Kent. Of this region, a land of mountain and sea, deep feathery lanes and "fold on fold of neutral-tinted fells," Miss Holme gives singularly beautiful pictures. A very close observation, a deep love of place, a gift for the poetic expression of every sight and sound and smell, coupled with an almost anguished sense of evil, give her novels a considerable emotional tension. Her characters are mostly land-agents—of the craftsman type—and farmers; she uses realistic dialect sparingly, preferring the Hardy method of "giving an impression" of peasant speech. In all Miss Holme's novels, but especially in *The Lonely Plough* (1914), the reader is constantly aware of the peculiar geographical conditions of life in the district: the Kent tidal wave, which daily runs its swift and irresistible course and may in time of storm flood the marsh farms and bring ruin and death to their inhabitants, can never be forgotten. The plot of *The Lonely Plough* depends entirely on the doubt whether a certain sea-wall bridling the estuary channel is a safeguard or a danger to the marsh, and when a wild night of storm proves it to be a danger, the fate of every character in the novel hangs on the question whether this wall will break or no. Every element here but the theme is strongly regional. Miss Holme's theme however is always the defeat of the dark powers by the steadfastness of men and women, so that in her work this element remains untinged by local dye.

A link between these writers and the next group, in time as in method, is formed by Francis Brett Young, who in *The Iron Age* (1916) and *The Black Diamond* (1921) wrote perceptively of the local iron and coal as moulders of individual lives in Staffordshire and Wales respectively, and gave us a horrify-



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ing glimpse of Black country chainmakers in *Far Forest* (1936). In *White Ladies* (1935) he seemed about to begin a saga of the Midland iron and steel industry, but swerved to another theme in later chapters. There seems often an uncertainty about Brett Young's theme when his story is laid in his beloved Midlands, as though he was torn between its claims and those of his characters to take the centre of the stage; in all his novels he expends what some readers consider an inordinate number of pages in sensitive and delicate descriptions of the Midlands countryside.

It has been reserved for writers beginning their work in the late 1920's and 1930's, however, to add the last touch of consciousness to the regional *genre*, to dip the novel wholly in the local dye, cover with the regional sea the last tidemark of sand. The number of regional novelists writing in this period is considerable. Both the number, and the consciousness of regionalism just referred to, are in my opinion traceable to a great sociological cause.

The years in question are those during, and just following, the great economic depression of this century. This depression hit the trades of England one by one; some felt the pinch at a slightly earlier, some at a slightly later date. Owing to the geographical conditions discussed in the first section of this essay, a trade in England is often conterminous with a region—it is so with steel, with pottery, cloth, cotton and shipbuilding. Thus a whole region was often hit simultaneously by the depression. As a member of a region thus struck, I observed that all of us in the West Riding of Yorkshire suddenly became, under the hammer-blow of adversity, very conscious of the common occupation on which we all depended, which linked

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us to our native soil. We saw, we were made very forcibly to see, that when overseas markets did not want our cloth, all of us in the West Riding suffered as a consequence. We were a community, we found; we formed a distinct and separate region. When any strong communal feeling of any kind is brought into being and grows in intensity, it naturally becomes shared by the community's artists, and thus finds expression. Nothing could be more natural; therefore, than the outburst of regional fiction in the period named; the writers of this fiction were impelled by pity, anger or admiration to record their native region's sufferings, and perhaps to seek in the past some of the reasons for them. Such writers were highly conscious of belonging to a given region, and consciously intended to depict it in their fiction.

Two passionately regional novels of this kind were Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1933) and J. L. Hodson's *Harvest in the North* (1934), which each describe the impact of the depression on the cotton industry of Lancashire, while in *Jonathan North* (1939) Mr. Hodson sketched the kind of *entrepreneur* who made the slump possible. Meanwhile T. Thompson continually delights his readers with humorous studies of the contemporary Lancashire scene, both in short dialect sketches and novels such as *Blind Alley* (1934) and *Song o' Sixpence* (1935).

The county of Yorkshire has been peculiarly rich in regional fiction during the period under survey, all three Ridings. "Riding" comes from the Danish word "thridding," meaning a third part—having made their contribution.

Margaret Storm Jameson has given us fine pictures of the wild Yorkshire coast of the North Riding and of the wild Yorkshire character, in the sequence beginning with *The Lovely Ship* (1927), where the story of that very Yorkshire

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woman, Mary Hansyke, owner of a shipbuilding yard and a ship line, is told. More consciously regional, perhaps, is her *The Moon is Making*; the Wikker family of Wik could hardly exist anywhere but in that northern port. The life of North Riding fishermen is vigorously presented by Leo Walmsley in *Three Fevers* (1932), *Foreigners* (1935) and *Sally Lunn* (1937).

The East Riding has found its expression in the brilliant work of Winifred Holtby, especially in her *South Riding*, a highly regional novel. (To prevent mystification, I had better explain that there is no "south" riding in Yorkshire; Winifred Holtby invented it for the same reasons as Trollope invented Barchester.) Her descriptions of the south-east Yorkshire landscape are beautiful, her Yorkshire characters living; but the most striking feature of the novel is its theme. Local government, as a romance of human co-operation and the first line of human defence against material and spiritual ills, provides at once the plot, the characters and the structure of this admirable novel.

J. B. Priestley showed signs of becoming a West Riding regional novelist in *The Good Companions* (1929), where his descriptions of the Pennine Moors and of the life of a West Riding town were regional classics, and for my own part I like his work best when it is regional, though I know he does not share this view. Certain passages in *Wonder Hero* (1933) show what he could have done for the tragedy of the depressed industrial north if he had chosen; Jess Oakroyd gives us a more cheerful view. I am under the necessity here of mentioning my own work, which in six novels written from 1929 to 1941 presents some aspects of the history of the West Riding from the 17th to the 20th centuries. Lettice Cooper's novels *Private Enterprise* (1932) and *We Have Come to a Country* (1935)

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deal poignantly with the effects, on masters and men respectively, of the industrial depression in the West Riding; her *National Provincial* (1938) gives an effective cross-section of West Riding political life. The steel region of the West Riding finds expression in the novels of Roger Dataller, *Uncouth Swain* (1933) and *Steel Saraband* (1938).

This by no means exhausts the list of contemporary Yorkshire regional novelists; the names of Thomas Armstrong and Winifred Williams spring to the mind, among others, as the authors of single novels of the consciously regional kind, while the admirable short stories of Malachi Whitaker add a strong sardonic thread to the regional tapestry. It is perhaps worth mentioning that in 1938 a Yorkshire Authors' Dinner was held, which no fewer than 108 Yorkshire writers attended. They were not all regional novelists, certainly; but there was evidently a sufficiently strong regional consciousness in the county's rather remarkably large number of writers to make the function welcome.

Rural regional writers of this period are R. H. Mottram, H. W. Freeman, and Doreen Wallace, who all present the farming life of East Anglia in its economic aspect. R. H. Mottram contributes a study of a Norfolk country bank in *Our Mr. Dormer* (1927); H. W. Freeman's *Fathers of Their People* (1932), a fine study of the makings of a Suffolk farmer, reveals too the change in the economic structure of farm life ushered in by the 20th century; while Doreen Wallace's *So Long to Learn* (1936) is in essence a history of East Anglian agricultural vicissitudes from 1914 to 1935.

The economic emphasis of these regional novels of the 1930's is sufficient indication of the source of their inspiration in the economic pressure of the slump; now that the supreme interest of the day has swung from economics to politics, from

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industry to the international struggle, it seems probable that regionalism in the novel may be superseded, at any rate temporarily, by fiction of national expression. It is the unity rather than the diversity of our country which looms large in our mind in 1941.

There is one notable writer of the present day, only just lost to us, whose work does not fit into the sociological category described above, unless indeed it is related on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle. *Rogue Herries* (1930), *Judith Paris* (1931), *The Fortress* (1932) and *Vanessa* (1933), portraying "the history of a family that should cover two hundred years and have throughout the same English scene for its centre," as their author himself describes them, form "a piece of gaily-tinted tapestry worked in English colours," to which *The Bright Pavilions* (1940) adds an earlier panel. For myself I have hesitated to call Hugh Walpole a regional novelist, for his chosen location always seems to me to be faery lands forlorn rather than the real soil of Cumberland; the Herries family do not strike me as indigenous to Borrowdale. This is not to quarrel with Walpole's rendering, for every writer must write from his own point of view, must express his own vision, and has the right to be a romantic if he chooses; it is simply to say that the point of view in *The Herries Chronicle* is not very regional. The Herries follow lures of the spirit to the exclusion of the ordinary avocations of Lakeland life; there is no attempt at Cumberland dialect or Cumberland character, no close knowledge of Cumberland social conditions—indeed there is a revolt, conscious or unconscious, against economic preoccupations in all Walpole's later work. The great mountains, the mists, the rains, the snows, of that inspiring piece of earth

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do indubitably and majestically tower above the scene in these novels, however, so that to this extent the *Chronicle* belongs to the regional *genre*.

We have seen that almost every yard of English soil has been celebrated in English regional fiction, and that our regional novelists number in their ranks some of our greatest writers; this kind of writing has therefore certainly achieved enough, both in quantity and quality, to merit discussion as an art form. What are the merits and defects of this *genre*, which has bulked so considerably of late in English literature?

Readers in search of the defects of the regional novel need only turn to Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) to find them deliciously and permanently parodied—preserved, flies in amber, in Miss Gibbons' clear cool satire. The heavy (and most agreeably invented) dialect, the unnecessary ferocity of the Starkadders, the decaying ancestral farm, the obtrusive sheep with odd names, the purple passages of landscape, the "something nasty in the woodshed"—all, all are too like the pukka regional novel to be read with any comfort (or only very cold comfort) by any of the writers mentioned above.

Dialect can, frankly, be a bore; apostrophes and misspellings are as difficult to a reader's eye as a ploughed field to his boots. Moreover, the excessive use of dialect in fiction does undoubtedly tend to make its speakers appear merely "quaint" instead of truly human. We have seen, however, that the great practitioners in the regional *genre* can surmount this difficulty by artistic selection, and that regional speech can, in the case of such characters as Mrs. Poyser, Granfer Cantle or Denry Machin, add racy proverbial sayings to the common stock. Dialect speech is used by people who are actually in

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contact with realities; the soil, the animal, the machine-tool are stubborn physical facts, with certain strongly-marked attributes of colour, shape and smell, and speech which draws on such realities for its images rather than on book-made phrases is colourful and vigorous speech. Dialect may therefore be either a weakness or a strength to the writer, according to his own artistic and human capacity.

A more serious accusation brought against regional fiction is that it is too local, not sufficiently universal in its reference; with this goes the complaint that it is too homely, too pre-occupied with what George Eliot calls "vulgar details." A critic of Arnold Bennett once complained that in his work "you look for an emotion, and you fall over the coal-scuttle"; and if a bucket of sheep-dip be substituted for the coal-scuttle, that would go for the rural regional school too.

Certainly the regional novel lacks the enchantment which *distance* lends to the view. Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, all admit that they do not wish to portray that kind of romance; they prefer the dusty streets, the common green fields, the real breathing men and women, of life which is familiar, homely, near at hand. Arnold Bennett busies himself with presenting truth "through the external envelope of facts," and if observed facts are to be facts, they must be observed at close quarters. But to pretend that the near familiar life has no romance, no beauty, no poetry, is nonsense, after all; every region of the world is home to somebody. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder; romance depends on the writer's point of view. That this is sometimes "as unromantic as Monday morning," and that the regional form tends to encourage such prosaic pedestrianism, may sometimes be true, though as we have seen not always; the gaze is certainly

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narrowed if one surveys Yorkshire rather than human destiny. The writer of genius can, however, see human destiny through his chosen region, as appears in the case of Hardy.

But let us look for a moment at the other side of the picture. What are the merits of the regional novel?

Its first great merit is, of course, its brilliant illuminations of English landscape; with the extent and variety which it offers of these no other art can at present compete.

Its transcendent merit is that of verisimilitude. A detailed faithfulness to reality, a conscientious presentation of phenomena as they really happen in ordinary everyday life on a clearly defined spot of real earth, a firm rejection of the vague, the high-flown and the sentimental, an equally firm contact with the real: these are the marks of the regional novel, which occupies in fiction the place of the Dutch school of painters in art.

Lastly, the regional novel is essentially democratic. It expresses a belief that the ordinary man and the ordinary woman are interesting and worth depicting; its use of the craftsman type as main characters is one of its great contributions to human progress. It has a particular strength in the depiction of character, for the two great factors in the formation of character are heredity and environment, and in the regional novel characters are shown in their native environment, and surrounded by their families, i.e. their ancestors and their descendants. In regional novels the characters always appear, for indeed they always do in provincial life, strongly individual, because well known to all in that district; in their own home town or village persons never become anonymous "masses," but remain individual men.



## The English Regional Novel

We may say, then, that locality, reality and democracy are the watchwords of the English regional novelist, and the contribution of his work to literature.

It is tempting to consider what qualities a nation has whose literature is rich in this kind of novel. A strong love of the homeland, a firm belief in reality as opposed to the exaggerated and high-flown, a respect for craftsmanship, a not very vocal but deeply-rooted conviction that each individual whatever his idiosyncrasies has his rights: we may perhaps suggest that these are the qualities of our English culture, and offer our English regional novels in evidence.

## English Regional Novelists

(Arranged by County)

### "BARSETSHIRE" (i.e. South-West)

Trollope, Anthony

### CORNWALL

Baring-Gould, S.  
Dawson Scott, C. A.

Hardy, Thomas  
Phillpotts, Eden

### CUMBERLAND

Walpole, Hugh

### DERBYSHIRE

Eliot, George

Moult, Thomas

### DEVONSHIRE

Blackmore, R. D.  
Hardy, Thomas

Phillpotts, Eden

### DORSET

Hardy, Thomas

### KENT

Kaye-Smith, Sheila

### LANCASHIRE

Gaskell, E. C.,  
Greenwood, Walter

Hodson, J. L.  
Thompson, T.

### LINCOLNSHIRE

Eliot, George

### MAN, ISLE OF

Caine, Hall

# 'The English Regional Novel

## NORFOLK

Mottram, R. H.

Wallace, Doreen

## SHROPSHIRE

Webb, Mary

## SOMERSET

Hardy, Thomas

## STAFFORDSHIRE

Bennett, Arnold  
Eliot, George

Young, Francis Brett

## SUFFOLK

Freeman, H. W.

Wallace, Doreen

## SUSSEX

Kaye-Smith, Sheila

## WARWICKSHIRE

Eliot, George

Young, Francis Brett

## "WESSEX" (i.e. South-West and West)

Hardy, Thomas

## WESTMORLAND

Holme, Constance

## YORKSHIRE

Armstrong, Thomas  
Bentley, Phyllis  
Booth, E. C.  
Brontë, Charlotte  
Brontë, Emily  
Cooper, Lettice  
Dataller, Roger  
Fletcher, J. S.

Holtby, Winifred  
Jameson, M. Storm  
Priestley, J. B.  
Snowden, Keighley  
Sutcliffe, Halliwell  
Walmsley, Leo  
Whitaker, Malachi  
Williams, W.

